# ACL-IJCNLP 2021 Program Chair Report

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## 1. Introduction

The past one and a half years has been one of the most challenging periods in our lifetimes due to the pandemic. Despite the challenge, ACL-IJCNLP 2021 has made a record in multiple aspects:

- We received 3350 full submissions (only slightly less than 3429 submissions for ACL 2020), from which 710 were accepted to the main conference and 493 to the *Findings*.
- Our program committee, likely the largest one in the ACL history, consists of three **Program Chairs (PCs)**, 60 **Senior Area Chairs (SACs)**, 323 **Area Chairs (ACs)**, 3685 primary reviewers and 262 secondary reviewers.
- We started a few new initiatives, including having an abstract submission deadline and being the first ACL with *Findings* papers, an Ethics Advisory Committee (EAC), and a Reviewer Mentoring Program.

In this report, we summarize the main tasks that we have been working on (Section 2). Next, we show some submission statistics with respect to subject areas, countries, and comparison with previous years (Section 3). We will conclude the report with some lessons we learned in the past year and some recommendations which we hope could benefit future conference organizers (Section 4).

More information about ACL-IJCNLP 2021 can be found here:

- Conference website: https://2021.aclweb.org/
- Conference blog: https://2021.aclweb.org/blog/
- Conference forum: https://2021.aclweb.org/mybb/index.php
- Virtual Conference website: https://underline.io/events/167/
- Conference proceedings: https://www.aclweb.org/anthology/events/acl-2021/

In addition, we will send the following documents to the ACL executive committee in case they are helpful for future conference organizers:

- PC Guide
- SAC Guide
- AC Guide
- Global Profile FAQs
- Paper Submission FAQs
- Reproducibility FAQs
- FAQs for the Decision Process, Camera-ready Version, and *Findings*
- Instructions for Camera-ready Submission

## 2. Our main tasks

While the full-paper submission deadline was February 1, 2021, we started our weekly planning meeting in June 2020. The whole process is very complicated, and the main tasks are explained below.

### 2.1 Defining tracks

Based on the topic tracks from previous conferences, we made adjustments and used 24 topic tracks, four being new:

1. Based on the number of submissions in previous conferences, we followed NAACL 2021 in combining two tracks ("Semantics: Sentence Level" and "Semantics: Textual Inference and Other Areas of Semantics") into a single track "Semantics: Sentence-level Semantics, Textual Inference and Other areas".
2. To accommodate a wider and more diverse area, we changed the name of the "Computational Social Science and Social Media" track to the "Computational Social Science and Cultural Analytics" track.
3. Following NAACL 2021, we combined the "Theory and Formalism" with the "Cognitive Modeling and Psycholinguistics" areas into "Linguistic theories, Cognitive Modeling and Psycholinguistics". This track is designed to encourage submissions targeted to theoretical underpinning of NLP models which had little/small presence in the past ACL conferences.
4. We introduced a new theme: "NLP for Social Good (NLP4SG)". The application of AI to provide positive social impact has been an important topic in recent years. However, to date, this has not been a topic highlighted at the ACL main conference. This track is designed to invite submissions that can provide insight for the ACL-IJCNLP community on the topic of NLP for Social Good as well as how NLP could potentially cause or be used for social harm. In the review form, a question specially designed for theme papers is added. The reviewers are asked to check the topic(s) that a theme paper covers, e.g., defining "NLP for Social Good" and in which ways NLP can improve people's lives in various dimensions, and quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the social impact of NLP research, etc. In addition to a poster session and an oral session dedicated to the theme, we will present the best Theme paper award at the Best Paper Session at the end of the main conference.

### 2.2 Creating calls for papers (CFPs) and the submission forms

We sent out preliminary, first, second, and final CFPs on 10/5/2020, 11/5/2020, 1/5/2021, and 1/19/2021, respectively. Starting with the CFP for ACL 2020, we added the part for the new theme, impact statement, ethic reviews, reproductivity checklist, the revised track list, page limit on the Appendix, etc. We also drafted and posted FAQs for Softconf Global Profiles, Paper submission, and Reproductivity, etc.

We created a new form for abstract submission. On the full-paper submission form, we added the reproducibility checklist, questions for the impact statement, etc.

## 2.3 Recruiting SACs and ACs

To meet the reviewer demands of a growing conference without compromising review quality, we started recruiting Senior Area Chairs (SACs) and Area Chairs in early fall 2020. To reduce the heavy workload of SACs, we had at least two SACs for each track. 10 big tracks had 3 SACs and the largest track, i.e., Machine Learning for NLP, had 4 SACs.

SACs were then responsible for recruiting ACs in their own tracks. We expected each AC to be in charge of 12 to 15 papers. We provided SACs with the minimum number and maximum number of the ACs required in a track based on the submission numbers at ACL 2020 and EMNLP 2020. In total, our program committee includes 60 SACs and 323 ACs.

## 2.4 Recruiting reviewers

As the NLP field has expanded significantly in recent years, it becomes harder and harder to find a sufficient number of qualified reviewers. Unlike ACL 2020, we decided not to make reviewer volunteering mandatory for submission authors. Instead, we did the following:

1. We invited 9,000+ reviewers. We compiled a long list of reviewers from previous conferences and sent out invitations to more than 9,000 candidates, asking the ones who were willing to serve to fill out a Microsoft reviewer form. About 4,400 of the invitees filled out the form. Through the form we collected a variety of information on potential reviewers like semantic scholar page, anthology page, website, self-declared reviewer experience, 1st & 2nd track preferences, etc.
2. We created a spreadsheet to share with SACs. The spreadsheet has one tab that includes all the information on the 4,400+ reviewer form, and a separate tab per track which has three main sections: (1) reviewers who chose the track as their first-preferred track, (2) reviewers who chose the track as their second-preferred track, and (3) additional reviewers who SACs can recruit directly.
3. SACs selected reviewers from the spreadsheet and added additional reviewers if needed. First, the SACs of each track selected their reviewers from the first section of their tab. We then updated the second section of the tab for each track so that the reviewers already selected by one track will no longer be available to other tracks. Second, SACs were asked to select additional reviewers from the second section (i.e., second-preferred track), including only those reviewers who were not selected in their first-preferred track. Finally, in case the number of expected reviewers for a given track was higher than reviewers selected so far, we asked the SACs to provide more reviewers in the third section and to contact those reviewers directly through Softconf.
4. After the abstract submission deadline, we checked each track to determine whether it has enough reviewers based on the submission number. If not, we asked SACs to recruit more reviewers. We also asked all SACs to recruit emergency reviewers to handle late reviews.

The process started in late Nov 2020 and completed in early Feb 2021. In total, we had 3685 primary reviewers, who can invite secondary reviewers if needed.

**2.5 Abstract and full-paper Submission**

To synchronize with NAACL 2021 and give NAACL authors an opportunity to withdraw their submissions and resubmit them to our conference based on NAACL rebuttal, we had a much shorter submission-to-notification review cycle (February 1 till May 5, 2021), compared to ACL 2020. To alleviate the impact of the shorter review cycle, we introduced an abstract submission step, with a deadline on January 25, 2021.

In total, we received 4266 abstract submissions. Among them, 916 did not submit the full paper or withdrew before or shortly after the full-paper submission deadline (e.g. due to erroneous multiple abstract submissions), resulting in 3350 valid full-paper submissions. Many authors submitted multiple abstracts of the same paper or did not submit the full papers; consequently, the number of abstract submissions provided only an upper bound, but not a good estimate, of the number of full-paper submissions.

**2.6 Assigning submissions to tracks and handling desk-reject**

After the full-paper submission deadline, the 3350 full-paper submissions were automatically assigned to the 24 tracks based on the subject areas selected by the authors. We then asked SACs to check all the submissions in their tracks and flagged those (1) that should belong to a different track, (2) that have violated ACL policies, or (3) with which SACs have conflict-of-interest (COI).

For (1), we checked SACs' recommendations and moved papers to new tracks if needed. This process took much effort from SACs and PCs, and eventually about 300 papers were moved across tracks.

For (2), violations of ACL policies include format issues, failure to anonymize the submission and supplementary material, over the page limit, and so on. One major issue we encountered was the violation of the 4-page limit on the Appendices. We introduced the limit to prevent authors from using the long Appendices to get around the page limit on the submission itself. Although we clearly stated the Appendix page limit in the call-for-papers (CFPs), a few dozen submissions violated the limit. Because EMNLP 2020 did not have the page limit for the Appendix and our CFPs did not explicitly state that the violation of the limit would lead to desk reject, after much debate we decided to be lenient and gave the authors two options: either their submission would be desk rejected or they allowed us to manually cut their Appendices to 4 pages. All the authors chose the latter. With this issue resolved, we checked other violations and eventually 19 submissions were desk rejected for other violations.

For (3), we downloaded COI detected by Softconf, ran Amanda Stent's COI detection software, and then combined the results with the COI self-identified by SACs. If a submission had COI with all the SACs in that track, it was moved to a special track called the "COI track", which has its own SACs, ACs and reviewers. There were 19 such submissions.

## 2.7 Checking overlap and double submissions

We contacted (and were contacted by) PC chairs of several NLP/ML/AI conferences in order to check double submissions. Specifically, besides the check with NAACL 2021 and the past publications at ACL anthology through Softconf's built-in DUDE system, we exchanged paper titles, authors and abstracts with ECML-PKDD, ICML, IJCAI, SIGIR and WSDM, and computed the overlap between their submissions and ours based on paper titles and author names. In non-obvious cases, we asked the relevant SAC to help us with the check.

For papers with big overlap, the full papers were checked by the PCs of both conferences and decisions were then made by each conference. Nine papers were desk rejected due to double submission. One was double submitted to ECML-PKDD, one to IJCAI 2021, four to NAACL 2021, and three to SIGIR 2021.

## 2.8 Detecting COIs and generating initial AC/reviewer assignments

Following ACL 2020, EMNLP 2020, and NAACL 2021, we carried out offline COI detection and automatic paper assignment using Amanda Stent's COI detection software and Graham Neubig's automatic reviewer-paper assignment software.

We made a lot of changes to Neubig's assignment software. For instance, the paper assignment used to be treated as one big optimization problem for all tracks combined. We changed the code so that the paper assignment is now treated as multiple optimization problems, one for each track. This led to significant speedup and more robustness of the system. We also revised the code so that it produced additional output (such as top N reviewers and COI information for each paper) besides the paper assignment.

We created a branch at Graham's github and the details of the changes are at https://github.com/acl-org/reviewer-paper-matching/pull/26. Later we contacted Graham Neubig about those changes and he has merged our branch to the master branch.

## 2.9 Manually adjusting paper assignments

The automatic reviewer assignments have some issues, and the major ones are:

1) The assignment workload can be very imbalanced with some reviewers getting six papers while others getting zero or one paper.
2) Some 1st-time reviewers get many papers while more experienced reviewers may get very few papers.
3) The paper assignment system calculates the similarity between a reviewer and a submission by the similarity between the abstracts of the reviewer's publications and the abstract of the submission. There is no gold standard that one can use to determine whether such a similarity function works well and how good the paper assignments are.

The imbalance of the workload is partly due to the max number of papers reviewers indicated they were willing to review. A more fundamental reason for the first two issues is that the objective function used by the paper assignment system does not take into consideration the workload balance and the experience of the reviewers. Also, it would be nice if someone can

conduct a thorough evaluation of the system. We have discussed this with Graham Neubig and issued tickets at the paper assignment system's Github site.

To partially address the workload balance issue, we created two sets of reviewer assignments for each track with the default value of max_paper_per_reviewer set to six and min_paper_per_reviewer set to either one or zero. We did the same for AC assignment with max_paper_per_AC set to 16 and min_paper_per_AC set to either three or zero. We shared the assignment results with SACs, who would then decide which set of assignments they would use as the initial assignment. Then, SACs manually adjusted AC assignments and reviewer assignments.

Some SACs told us that the manual adjustment took a lot of time. Ideally, SACs could ask ACs to help. However, ACs' roles are greatly limited due to the current implementation of ACs in Softconf. ACs in Softconf are treated as "meta-reviewers" who do not have access to submissions not assigned to them and to the reviewer accounts in their track. Therefore, ACs could not do much with the manual reviewer adjustments. We have given this feedback to Softconf and hopefully Softconf will be extended to better support ACs' work for future conferences.

### 2.10 The Reviewer Mentoring Program

Given the rapid growth of NLP in terms of number of papers and new students, it is very important for our community to mentor and train our new reviewers. Therefore, this year we continued the reviewer mentoring program launched with ACL 2020. Ultimately, the goal is to provide long-needed mentoring to new reviewers. We formed a reviewer mentoring committee with three chairs. They are Jing Huang, Antoine Bosselut, and Christophe Gravier, who have written a detailed report on the program.

We collaborated with the reviewer mentoring committee in completing the following tasks:

1. The mentoring committee conducted an SAC/AC survey, and 130 SACs/ACs responded. The results are posted to https://2021.aclweb.org/blog/reviewer-mentoring-survey/.
2. The mentoring committee made 5 tutorial videos.
   a. The videos were on various aspects of reviewing: i) the ACL review process, ii) the ACL 2021 review form, iii) ethics, iv) rebuttal and v) reproducibility.
   b. The videos were posted at the ACL vimeo site (https://vimeo.com/aclweb), and we asked all the reviewers to watch them before reviewing.
3. The reviewing committee facilitated one-on-one mentoring, which has several steps.
   a. Based on the signup forms filled out by reviewers in December 2020, the committee invited first-time ACL reviewers to sign up for one-on-one mentoring, and sent the signup information to us. About 230 reviewers signed up for the mentoring program.
   b. We passed the mentee information to SACs, and asked them to pair mentees with mentors (ACs) when they adjusted paper assignments. For most tracks, each AC was paired with at most one mentee.

    c. During the review cycle (February 25 - March 20, 2021), the mentors worked with the mentee, provided feedback and helped the mentee to improve the quality of his/her reviews.

Because mentoring reviewers was not specified as part of AC duties during the AC recruitment stage, we received strong objections from several ACs, which is understandable given that we are all swamped with tasks. Also, pairing ACs with mentees added more complication to the paper assignment process. For instance, many mentees chose the wrong track when signing up for one-on-one mentoring, ACs and their mentees were not assigned the same paper by the SACs, etc. Given this complication, it might be better to try other venues for mentoring (e.g., encouraging senior reviewers to mentor their own students/employees as their secondary reviewers).

## 2.11 Creating the review form

Our review form was built upon the one from EMNLP-IJCNLP 2020 with some revision.

1. On the review form, we asked reviewers whether they have any ethical concerns about a submission that the chairs should be aware of.
2. We added reproducibility questions, and reviewers can answer them based on the full paper and authors' answers to the reproducibility questions on the submission form.
3. We added questions to ask reviewers whether they have changed their reviews after the rebuttal period and, if so, what's the reason for the change.
4. We also contacted Softconf to extend the platform so that the content in the review form has three types of accessibility: (i) visible to authors/reviewers/ACs/SACs/PCs, (ii) visible to ACs/SACs/PCs only, and (iii) visible to SACs/PCs only.

Softconf allows PCs to create only one review form. The only way to allow tracks to have their own forms is to create a "big" form that is the "union" of all the forms those tracks want to use. Then each track can create a "small" form by choosing the subset of questions in the big form. Given that we have 24 tracks, we decided to use the same review form for the regular (aka non-theme) tracks and the theme track. The form includes a few questions that are relevant only to the theme track and those questions are clearly marked as theme-track only.

Once the form was created, we contacted our SACs and the Reviewer Mentoring Committee for feedback. We also coordinated with the latter in writing guidelines and making tutorial videos for the reviewers.

## 2.12  The review period and late reviews

The review period started on February 25 and ended on March 20, 2021. We sent out several reminders during the review period. Here are some statistics:
- With approximately 3320 non-desk-rejected submissions and 3 reviews per submission, 9960+ reviews were due on March 20.
- Only 52% of reviews were turned in by the end of March 19.
- About one third of reviews were completed in the last 24 hours of the due time.
- 14% of reviews were at least 8 hours late.

- 4% of reviewers were at least three days late.

Due to the large number of reviews completed on the last day, it was very hard for SACs to determine which submissions would be assigned emergency reviewers. Between March 20-24, SACs and ACs worked very hard to chase down the late reviews and assign emergency reviewers. As a result, when we started the rebuttal period on March 25, only 20 reviews (0.2% of the 9960+ reviews) were still missing.

## 2.13 Author response period

The author response period was from March 25 to 31, 2021. We set the maximum length of author response to 1,000 words. The authors can enter their response in boxes that are visible to reviewers and boxes that are visible to chairs only. Chairs here refer to the AC in charge of the submission, the SACs in that track who have no COI with the submission, and the PCs.

## 2.14  Discussion Period and AC recommendation

The Discussion Period was from April 1 to 7, 2021, during which ACs led discussions among reviewers for all the papers. We asked ACs to pay special attention to papers:

1) that have a large overall-recommendation score gap (e.g., when max - min > 1),
2) for which some reviews were very short or vague, or
3) for which authors had confidential comments to chairs in which they (strongly) disagreed with some reviewers.

ACs also reminded the reviewers to read author responses carefully when reviewers finalized their reviews. Above 60% of the reviews were marked as "Yes" in the Softconf Read Status records (meaning that the reviewers have read the author response).

Between April 8 and 14, ACs wrote meta-reviews and made a recommendation for each paper with one of the four labels: "Accept", "Maybe Accept", "Maybe Reject", and "Reject". The recommendation should be based on the quality of the paper, the 3+ reviews, reviewers' discussion, and the AC's own judgment of the paper. We asked ACs NOT to consider whether a paper should be accepted by the *Findings*, as we did not want the possibility of having *Findings* papers to affect ACs' decisions.

## 2.15 SAC recommendations

Between April 15 and 24, SACs went over the papers in their track and divided them into four groups:
- Definitely Accepted - 20% of papers
- Could be Accepted to ACL-IJCNLP (clear accept to *Findings*) - 10% of papers
- Could be Accepted to *Findings* (clear reject from conference) - 10% of papers
- Rejected - 60% of papers

The percentage of each group was provided as a rough reference only. SACs were also asked to rank papers in the two middle categories ("Could be Accepted") with a brief explanation to support their decisions. The detailed instructions were in the SAC guide.

**2.16 PC acceptance decisions**

The acceptance decision was made in three steps:

1) Based on the AC and SAC recommendations (and in some cases, also 3+ reviews, discussion board and the submission itself), we divided the submissions into three groups:
   - P1: Accept-to-Main-Conference: about 20-25% of the papers
   - P2: Accept-to-Findings: about 15-20% of the papers
   - P3: Reject: about 60% of the papers

2) Our Ethics Advisory Committee (EAC) chairs labeled each "flagged" paper (see Section 2.19 for details) with one of three labels:
   - E1: The paper does not have serious ethical issues.
   - E2: The paper has some serious ethical issues and thus, if the paper is accepted, the camera-ready version needs to be checked by EAC to ensure ethical concern has been addressed in that version.
   - E3: The paper should be rejected due to ethical concerns.

   If a flagged paper was labeled as P1 or P2 in Step 1, the EAC chairs wrote a meta review that highlighted the changes that EAC recommends authors to make in the camera-ready version.

3) We combined the P1-P3 with E1-E3 labels to reach the following acceptance decisions:
   - P3 papers are rejected regardless of the EAC recommendation
   - For P1 or P2 papers:
     ○ If EAC recommendation is E1, the paper is accepted to the main conference (aka Accept-P1) or to Findings (aka Accept-P2)
     ○ If EAC recommendation is E2, the paper is conditionally accepted, and the status is Accept-P1-condition or Accept-P2-condition.

Out of 3350 submissions, 28 papers were conditionally accepted. The acceptance notification was sent out on May 6, 2021.

**2.17 Camera-ready versions**

Below is the list of the main tasks we worked on between May 6 (acceptance notification deadline) and June 1 (camera-ready deadline):

- Answered questions from authors about acceptance decisions. We summarized tons of emails we received right after May 6, and wrote an 11-page FAQ to explain the review process and answer common questions. Then we replied to individual authors by referring to the prose in the FAQ.
- Conducted a survey about people's preferences about the way *Findings* papers will be "presented" at the conference (more in Section 2.20) .

- Wrote a 12-page file for camera-ready instructions, and answered questions from authors about the instructions.
- Created a camera-ready submission page in Softconf. The authors of conditionally accepted papers were also asked to provide a document to explain how their camera-ready versions have made the changes required in the EAC meta review.

## 2.18 Final decisions on conditionally accepted papers

For conditionally accepted papers, the EAC checked the camera-ready version right after June 1 and informed us on June 5 whether their ethical concerns have been sufficiently addressed. We then informed the authors of the final decisions on June 7. Consequently, the "condition" on those papers were removed and the papers were accepted into the main conference or Findings, along with other Accept-P1 and Accept-P2 papers.

## 2.19 Ethics reviews

Following NAACL 2021, our conference has a special Ethics Advisory Committee (EAC) who is in charge of handling ethical issues in the submissions. We worked closely with the EAC throughout the review process.

1) Before the February 1 submission deadline:
   a) In the CFPs, we explained how ethical issues would be handled and informed authors that they can include an impact statement in their submission, which did not count toward the page limit.
   b) We added ethical questions to the full-paper submission form and the review form.
   c) We and the EAC worked out a plan for flagging and checking submissions with potential ethical issues.
   d) We coordinated with the Reviewer Mentoring Committee in making videos about how reviewers should handle ethical issues.
2) February 1 - March 20: We reminded reviewers to flag submissions with potential ethical issues.
3) March 20-25: After the reviews were due on March 20, 2021 and most late reviews were submitted by March 24, we copied the flagged submissions to a special track for the EAC on March 25.
4) March 25 - April 15: EAC chairs checked the submissions in their track and assigned EAC reviewers to the submissions if needed. The EAC reviews were due on April 15, 2021.
5) April 15 - May 5: Based on the EAC reviews, EAC chairs sent us their recommendation for the flagged papers and wrote an EAC meta review for the ones that were tagged as P1 or P2 by us. We incorporated these recommendations when making the acceptance decisions (see Section 2.16).
6) May 6: We included the EAC reviews and meta reviews in our May 6 acceptance notification.

7) June 1-7: EAC chairs checked the camera-ready version of the conditionally accepted papers and informed us of their recommendations. We then informed the authors of the final decisions (see Section 2.18).

A total of 247 papers were flagged by the reviewers in Step 2, which were all copied to the EAC track in Step 3. The flagged papers were assigned to the EAC reviewers in Step 4. In Step 5, the EAC recommended a total of 28 Conditional Accept recommendations, and no rejections. In Step 7, all the conditionally accepted papers were accepted after they were checked by the EAC.

Due to the tight timeline for ethics review, the EAC process included triage to reduce reviewing load for papers with only common, remediable ethical issues. The EAC has made several recommendations to improve the ethics reviewing process. More details are in the EAC chairs' full report.

## 2.20 Findings

Given the interest and success of the "*Findings* of EMNLP 2020" initiative, we considered the pros and cons of accepting *Findings* papers in fall 2020, and decided to make the final decision on this in early April 2021 after we got a chance to go over the reviews. *Findings* papers are the ones that are not accepted for publication in the main conference, but nonetheless have been assessed by the Program Committee as solid work with sufficient substance, quality and novelty. To address the main concerns raised by authors when the "*Findings* of EMNLP 2020" initiative was announced, we did not ask reviewers and ACs to consider the *Findings* factor when writing their (meta-)reviews. Only SACs and PCs would consider whether a submission should be accepted to Findings. Out of 3350 submissions, 493 were invited to be included in the Findings, and 457 of them accepted the offer.

After the acceptance notification deadline, we asked ACL authors to fill out a survey for their preference over two possible methods to increase the visibility of *Findings* papers at the conference:

- Method 1: Authors of *Findings* papers are given the opportunity to upload a 3-minute video to the virtual conference site.
- Method 2: Following the EMNLP 2020 models, we help to connect the authors of *Findings* papers and ACL-IJCNLP 2021 workshops for possible presentations at the workshops.

The survey results showed that Method 1 was preferred. We then coordinated the uploading of the videos of *Findings* papers by working with authors and Underline. The Workshop chairs, Kentaro Inui and Michael Strube, volunteered to work on Method 2. As a result, more than 100 *Findings* papers will be presented at ACL-IJCNLP 2021 workshops.

## 2.21 Selecting best and outstanding papers

Best and outstanding papers were selected by the following process:

1) In early May 2021, we asked SACs to recommend up to two best papers in their tracks.
2) We compiled a list of submissions with high recommendations from reviewers or ACs.
3) We discussed the papers from Step 1-2 to come up with a list of best paper candidates.
4) We formed a Best Paper Selection Committee (BPSC), created a special track in the Softconf for the committee, and copied the candidate papers to the track.
5) The BPSC went over the papers and informed us of their decisions in late June.
6) We announced the results at the conference website on July 5.
7) We included a special Best Paper Session in the Main Conference Schedule.

### 2.22 Inviting keynote speakers

Based on the recommendations from our SACs, ACL executives and our own research, we invited three keynote speakers. The abstracts and bios of the keynote speakers were posted at the conference website and included in the main conference proceedings.

### 2.23 Acknowledging outstanding reviewers

The outstanding reviewers were selected by SACs and ACs. We included the list of outstanding reviewers as a separate category in the Program Committee pages in the main conference proceedings. We are also sending them electronic certificates to show our appreciation for their hard work.

### 2.24 Creating the schedule for the main conference

Making a schedule for such a big conference is never easy. It is even harder for virtual conferences as presenters live in different time zones. We made the schedule in several steps.

- We contacted TACL and CL editors for the TACL/CL papers that will be presented at our conference.
- We asked TACL, CL and our Accept-P1 authors to fill out a survey form, indicating their preferences for oral vs. poster, and for presentation time slots.
- We coordinated with ACL executives for the lengths and preferred time slots for special sessions such as ACL Business Meeting and Lifetime Award Session.
- Based on the survey results and information about the special sessions, we worked out a schedule outline and asked feedback from ACL executives and Underline.
- We then automatically created a detailed schedule that met various preferences and constraints, and manually adjusted it to accommodate more complex constraints.

The process was quite complex and it took us several weeks to finalize the schedule. We then posted the schedule to the conference website and informed authors and other speakers of that.

### 2.25 Making main conference proceedings

We worked with our publication team in making the main conference proceedings.

- After the camera-ready deadline, we kept receiving requests from authors who wanted to change their camera-ready submissions. The requests were handled by the publication team and us together.
- We provided the following documents to the publication team, including the conference schedule, the full Program Committee (including all the SACs, ACs, Best Paper Selection Committee, and primary/secondary/EAC/outstanding reviewers), the Preface from the PCs for the main conference proceedings, and the Preface for the *Findings* Papers.
- The publication team then sent us the proceedings for a final check.

### 2.26 Setting up the virtual conference site

Underline was chosen by the ACL executives to create the virtual conference site for ACL-IJCNLP 2021. A lot of work is required to create such a site. Our tasks include the following.

- Worked with Underline in creating the pre-recording submission form for authors and other speakers.
- Sent instructions to TACL/CL/ACL-IJCNLP authors for making and uploading pre-recordings
- Prepared several spreadsheets for Underline, including the ones for the main conference schedule, session chairs, the main stage speakers, and so on.
- Arranged for seven training sessions and sent the information to authors, session chairs, main stage speakers, demo/workshop/tutorial chairs, student volunteer coordinators, etc.
- Attended weekly meetings with Underline and helped Underline to connect with various ACL committees.

### 2.27 Preparing for the conference

To prepare for the conference, we found session chairs for 78 oral sessions and several special sessions. We also coordinated with other organizing committees (e.g., demo/tutorial/workshop chairs and student volunteer coordinator) and Underline to help presenters get familiar with the virtual conference site. In addition, we coordinated with ACL executives and PCs of incoming conferences about their presentations at the opening, closing, and special sessions.

### 2.28 Dealing with Softconf issues

For many tasks discussed in this section, we had to use Softconf. The Softconf platform is very powerful and complex with many hidden functionalities and a large number of options that PCs have to set up properly. Surprisingly, Softconf does not have a detailed manual for PCs, SACs, and ACs.

We ran into several issues with Softconf:

- The Softconf submission site crashed on February 1, right before the submission deadline, because Softconf servers could not handle the large number of uploads by the authors at the last minute. We stayed overnight and contacted Softconf right away, but we could not reach authors directly because we could not log onto softconf either. We contacted our webmasters and social media team to announce the extension of the submission deadline.
- Softconf's Mail-in tool either crashed or was very slow when we tried to send announcements to thousands of authors.
- For some unknown reasons, emails that are cc-ed to acl-ijcnlp2021@softconf.com (the alias email address for the PCs created by Softconf) are sent to Fei only, not to Roberto or Wenjie. So when Fei replied to the emails, the other two PCs did not see the reply. This causes a lot of confusion.
- COI calculation was not frozen after paper assignment and could change consistently (e.g., when an author submits a paper to another conference or changes his/her Softconf profile). As a result, SACs/ACs/reviewers would no longer be able to see certain submissions due to the changes of COIs done by Softconf.
- There were other bugs. For instance, 700+ withdrawn papers were mysteriously converted to be "undecided" on February 1, 2021. Another example is after the upgrade done by Softconf on March 1, suddenly every SAC could see the reviewer assignment from all tracks, including their own papers. We were not informed of the upgrade and did not know about the problem until some SACs contacted us about this.

Because of those issues and lack of Softconf manuals, we contacted Softconf many times. Rich Gerber, our contact person at Softconf, has been very helpful throughout the whole process and fixed all the issues above except the PC alias problem. Nevertheless, fixing bugs takes time and some bugs have serious consequences.

We had hundreds of email exchanges with Rich, which we had summarized to create our own 14-page Softconf FAQ. We also included the list of problems we encountered, the bugs fixed, and a wish list for new functionalities.


### 2.29 Contacting authors and posting announcements

We posted all the CFPs and PC blogs to the conference website. We communicated with SACs, ACs, reviewers, and authors mainly via softconf's mail tool. For track-specific issues, we used direct email to contact SACs and cc ACL2021programchairs@googlegroups.com so that all the emails were archived.

Contacting authors and posting announcements should have been an easy task, but that is not always the case.

- Softconf problems: The Softconf site crashed a few times and could not handle bulk emails (see Section 2.28), so we could not use Softconf's Mail-in tools to contact authors before the bugs were fixed.

- Bounced emails: Every time we use Softconf to email authors, hundreds of emails get bounced back because either the email addresses in authors' profiles are invalid or the authors' mail servers treat the emails from Softconf as spam. We informed authors about this problem and recommended them to use other email addresses, but the problem is never resolved for some of them.
- Delay in posting to the conference website: Partly due to different time zones and partly due to some unknown reasons, there were often delays between the time we contacted our webmasters and the time the information was posted correctly to the conference website. Long delay can be very frustrating when we were in middle of handling some crises (e.g., when Softconf crashed on February 1) and our mailbox was flooded by emails from authors inquiring about the crises or wrongly displayed information (e.g., missing papers from the Accepted Paper list and from the Main Conference Schedule).

To address those issues:

- We asked our webmasters to create a forum (https://2021.aclweb.org/mybb/) so that we can post announcements to the forum directly. But somehow the files attached to the messages in the forum cannot be opened by many people. As a result, we had to convert the attached files into some long text messages.
- We asked our social media team to spread the word, by including the urls of the conference forum posts in their social media posts.

However, not everyone will check the forum or social media often. Thus, there needs to be a better solution. Part of the solution is to ensure that webmasters are members of PCs' local teams, who can promptly post PCs' announcements to the conference website, especially during an emergency, as the conference website is the place that many authors would check first during such an emergency.


**2.30 Collaborating with other committees:**

As PCs, we have worked with thousands of people in the past year, including.

- Our program committee, consisting of 60 SACs, 323 ACs, 3685 primary reviewers, and 262 secondary reviewers (Section 2.3-2.15, 2.21-2.23)
- The Reviewer Mentoring Committee (Section 2.10)
- The EAC (Section 2.18-2.19)
- The Workshop Chairs for publicizing Findings papers (Section 2.20)
- The Best Paper Selection Committee for selecting Best and Outstanding papers (Section 2.21)
- Conference General Chair, ACL executives for general advice and the Main Conference Schedule (Section 2.22, 2.24-2.27)
- The TACL and CL editors for the Main Conference Schedule (Section 2.24)
- The Publication team for making the main conference proceedings and FIndings volume (Section 2.25)

- The Underline team, Student volunteer coordinator, Virtual Infrastructure Committee (VIC), Remote Presentation Committee, etc. for setting up virtual conference site (Section 2.26)
- Softconf, the platform that hosts all the submissions and reviews (Section 2.28)
- The Social Media team and the Webmasters for posting various announcements (Section 2.29)
- PCs of previous conferences for general advice
- 8757 authors who submitted to the main conference

It has been a privilege for us to work with so many people, but it can also be overwhelming to keep all the balls rolling and meet all the deadlines, especially when some parties do not respond promptly and we have to keep sending reminders.

### 2.31 Creating detailed documentation

We mainly used GoogleDrive to share documents with SACs, ACs, and other committees (see Section 2.30), which currently contains 750+ files with a total size of 1.1GB. GoogleDrive works well in general but people in some countries cannot access GoogleDrive easily. We could try other alternatives, such as OneDrive and Dropbox, but it is not clear to us what alternatives are secure and easy to use for all the parties that we work with.

We try to keep detailed documentation for our work, such as:

- PC meeting logs (72+ pages)
- Meeting logs with Underline, previous PC chairs, etc.
- PC guides (90+ pages)
- SAC guides (37 pages)
- AC guides (9 pages)
- Preliminary, first, second, and final CFPs
- A dozen blogs and FAQs for authors and reviewers
- Instructions for submission and camera-ready versions
- Paper assignments generated by the external paper assignment systems
- Logs for handling desk-reject papers and other flagged papers.

We will pass the PC/SAC/AC guides and other useful documents to ACL executives in case they are helpful for future conference organizers.

## 3. Conference Statistics

In this section, we report the main statistics from the main conference.

### 3.1 Submissions and acceptance rates

ACL-IJCNLP2021 received 3,350 papers (2,327 long and 1,023 short) and had a main conference paper acceptance rate of 21.2% and an additional *Findings* paper acceptance rate

of 14.7%. 3,350 is the second highest submission number for ACL (only slightly lower than 3,429 submissions in ACL 2020), which is quite impressive considering the big impact of the pandemic. To put that number in perspective, that number is more than double of the 1,544 submissions in 2018 and 3.5 times of the 940 submissions in 2012, as shown in Figure 1.
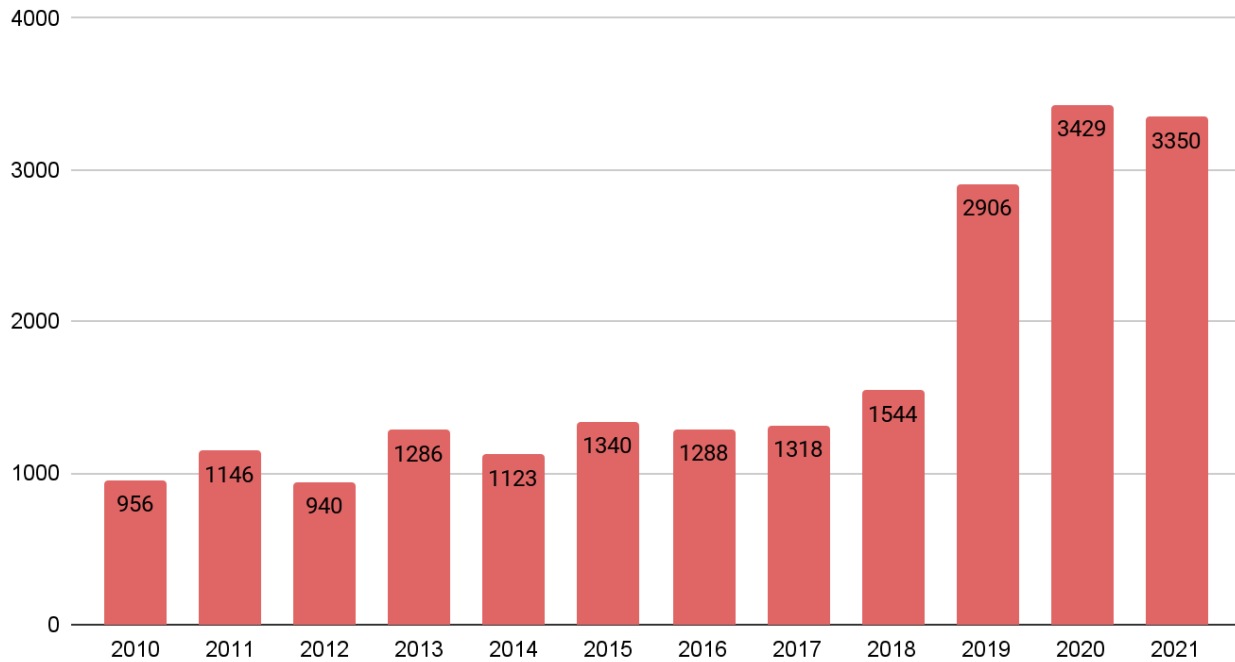
## ACL Submissions by Year

| Year | Submissions |
|------|-------------|
| 2010 | 956 |
| 2011 | 1146 |
| 2012 | 940 |
| 2013 | 1286 |
| 2014 | 1123 |
| 2015 | 1340 |
| 2016 | 1288 |
| 2017 | 1318 |
| 2018 | 1544 |
| 2019 | 2906 |
| 2020 | 3429 |
| 2021 | 3350 |

**Figure 1: ACL submissions by year (2010-2021).**

| Paper | Submissions | Accepted to Main Conference | | Invited to Findings[1] | | Appearing in Findings | |
|-------|-------------|--------|------|--------|------|--------|------|
| | | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % |
| **Long** | 2,327 | 571 | 24.5 | - | - | 339 | 14.6 |
| **Short** | 1,023 | 139 | 13.6 | - | - | 118 | 11.5 |
| **Total** | 3,350 | 710 | 21.2 | 493 | 14.7 | 457 | 13.6 |

**Table 1: ACL-IJCNLP 2021's acceptance rates.**

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[1] Some cells in Table 1 are missing because authors of some Findings papers withdrew their papers right after the acceptance notification before we got a chance to calculate the statistics.

Out of 3350 submissions, 710 were accepted to the main conference, yielding an acceptance rate of 21.2%. In addition, 493 were invited to Findings, and 457 of them accepted the offer. The statistics are shown in Table 1.

This year's overall acceptance rate is in line with the most recent editions of the ACL, as shown in Figure 2 (we note instead a clear decline in the acceptance rate of short papers). Note that submissions can be withdrawn at any time, and about 350 submissions were withdrawn between March 25 (the start of the rebuttal period) and May 5 (the date of acceptance notification). If Desk Rejects and Withdrawals are removed from the calculation, the acceptance rates for the main conference and the Findings are 24.4% and 15.7% respectively.



ACL Acceptance Rates by Year (2018 - 2021)
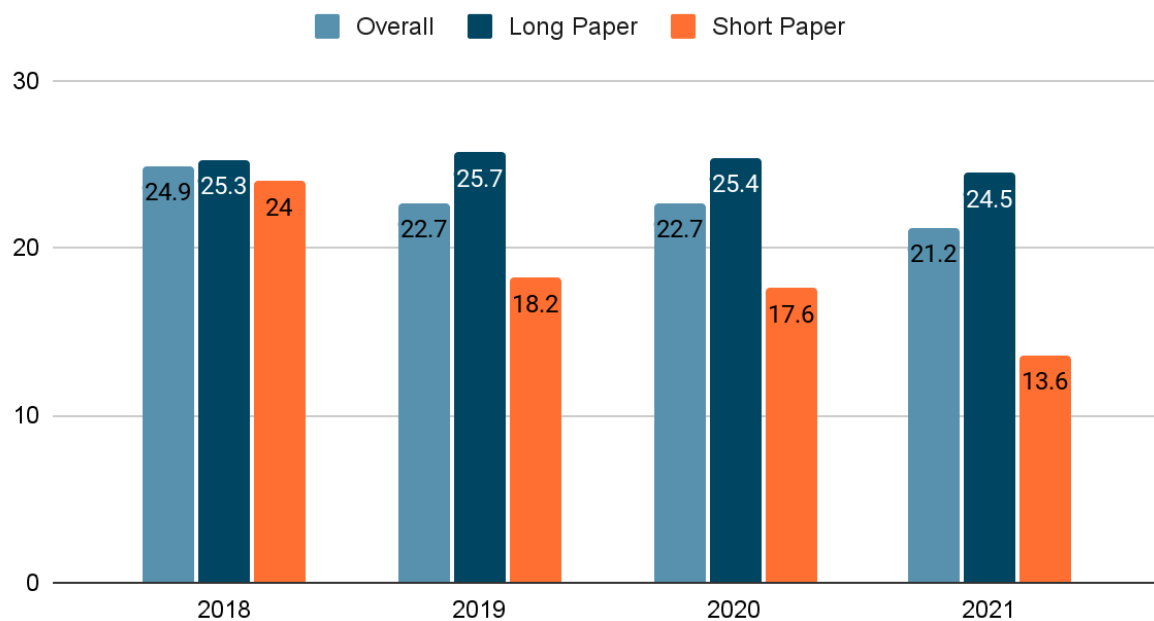
**Figure 2: Acceptance rates for ACL 2018-2021**

### 3.2 Track Statistics

Figure 3 shows the number of submissions by track. Among 24 tracks, Machine Learning for NLP, Machine Translation, Information Extraction Dialogue and Interactive Systems, and NLP Applications were the top five most popular tracks, with each having over 200 submissions; Machine Learning for NLP and Machine Translation had 315 and 287 submissions, respectively.

Acceptance rates for the tracks ranged from 17.1% to 40.0% for the main conference and 8.5% to 25% for the *Findings* as in Table 2.

## Number of submissions per track
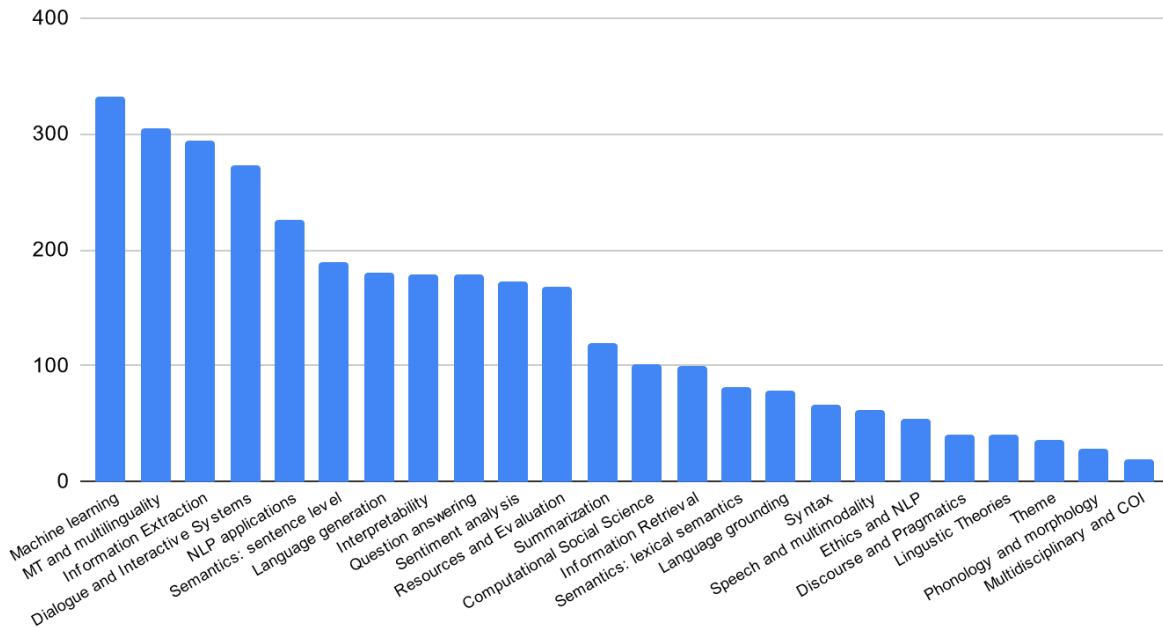


**Figure 3: Number of submissions per track. Some track names are shortened due to space constraints (e.g. MT for Machine Translation).**

| Track | Submission[2] | Accepted to Conference | | Invited to Findings | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Number[3] | % | Number[4] | % |
| Computational Social Science and Cultural Analytics | 102 | 21 | 20.6 | 12 | 11.8 |
| Dialogue and Interactive Systems | 273 | 58 | 21.2 | 38 | 13.9 |
| Discourse and Pragmatics | 41 | 9 | 22.0 | 6 | 14.6 |
| Ethics and NLP | 55 | 12 | 21.8 | 11 | 20.0 |
| Generation | 181 | 31 | 0.17.1 | 26 | 14.4 |
| Information Extraction | 295 | 62 | 21.0 | 45 | 15.3 |

---

[2] The data was collected immediately after the full paper submission deadline.
[3] The data was collected when the notification emails were sent out.
[4] The data was collected when the notification emails were sent out.

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Information Retrieval and Text Mining | 100 | 24 | 24.0 | 13 | 13.0 |
| Interpretability | 179 | 33 | 18.4 | 34 | 19.0 |
| Language grounding | 78 | 17 | 21.8 | 12 | 15.4 |
| Linguistic Theories | 41 | 11 | 26.8 | 7 | 17.1 |
| Machine learning for NLP | 332 | 70 | 21.1 | 44 | 13.3 |
| Machine translation | 305 | 75 | 24.6 | 35 | 11.5 |
| NLP applications | 226 | 41 | 18.1 | 39 | 17.3 |
| Phonology, morphology and word segmentation | 29 | 5 | 17.2 | 7 | 24.1 |
| Question answering | 179 | 36 | 20.1 | 26 | 14.5 |
| Resources and Evaluation | 168 | 41 | 24.4 | 26 | 15.5 |
| Semantics: lexical semantics | 82 | 19 | 23.2 | 7 | 8.5 |
| Semantics: sentence level | 189 | 46 | 24.3 | 27 | 14.3 |
| Sentiment analysis | 173 | 31 | 17.9 | 27 | 15.6 |
| Speech and multimodality | 62 | 13 | 21.0 | 8 | 12.9 |
| Summarization | 119 | 24 | 20.2 | 19 | 16.0 |
| Syntax: tagging, chunking and parsing | 66 | 15 | 22.7 | 14 | 21.2 |
| Theme | 36 | 8 | 22.2 | 5 | 13.9 |
| Multidisciplinary and COI | 20 | 8 | 40.0 | 5 | 25.0 |
| Desk Reject | 19 | - | - | - | - |
| Total | 3350 | 710 | 21.2 | 493 | 14.7 |

**Table 2: ACL-IJCNLP 2021's acceptance rates by track (main conference and Findings).**

## 3.3 Country/Region Statistics

We follow ACL 2020 in reporting the country/region of the contact author according to their Softconf profiles. Contact authors come from 57 countries/regions. Figure 4 shows the 25 countries/regions with the highest numbers of submissions: China led with 1239, followed by the United States with 826 and Great Britain with 158. The top three countries are the same as in ACL 2020, when the number of their submissions were 1084, 1039, and 161, respectively.



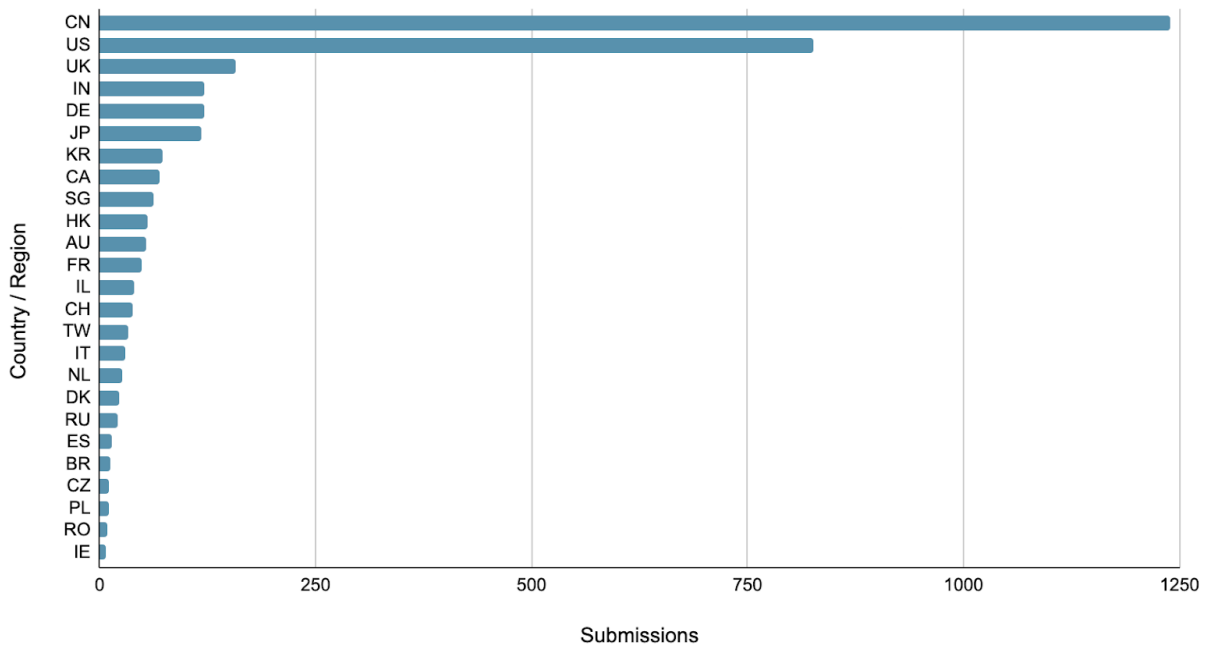Number of Submissions per Country/Region (Contact Author)

**Figure 4: Number of submissions by country/region of the contact author.**

Table 3 shows the number of submissions and acceptance rate for each country, again using the self-reported country information of the contact author. The 57 countries/regions are listed alphabetically; 36 of them have at least one paper accepted to the main conference. The five countries/regions with the highest numbers of papers accepted to the main conference were China (251), the United States (217), United Kingdom of Great Britain (47), Germany (27), and Canada (19).

As observed by the ACL 2020 Program Chairs, the distribution was too skewed for a fair comparison of acceptance rates. Following their analysis, if we consider the top 15 countries/regions in terms of number of submissions, those with the highest acceptance rates were Switzerland (31.6%), United Kingdom (29.7%), Canada (27.5%), United States (26.3%), and Singapore (25.8%).

| Country / Region | Code | Count | Accepted to conference | % Accepted Main | Accepted to Findings | % Accepted Findings |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

| Argentina | AR | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Armenia | AM | 1 | 1 | 100 | 0 | 0 |
| Australia | AU | 54 | 7 | 13 | 9 | 16.7 |
| Austria | AT | 6 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 33.3 |
| Bangladesh | BD | 5 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 40 |
| Belgium | BE | 4 | 1 | 25 | 1 | 25 |
| Brazil | BR | 13 | 1 | 7.7 | 3 | 23.1 |
| Bulgaria | BG | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Canada | CA | 69 | 19 | 27.5 | 14 | 20.2 |
| Cile | CL | 4 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 25 |
| China | CN | 1239 | 251 | 20.3 | 153 | 12.3 |
| Czech Republic | CZ | 11 | 3 | 27.3 | 0 | 0 |
| Denmark | DK | 23 | 3 | 13 | 6 | 26.1 |
| Estonia | EE | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Finland | FI | 5 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 20 |
| France | FR | 49 | 8 | 16.3 | 6 | 12.2 |
| Germany | DE | 121 | 27 | 22.3 | 14 | 11.6 |
| Greece | GR | 4 | 1 | 25 | 0 | 0 |
| Hong Kong | HK | 55 | 10 | 18.2 | 8 | 14.5 |
| Hungary | HU | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| India | IN | 122 | 10 | 8.2 | 18 | 14.8 |
| Indonesia | ID | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 100 |
| Iran | IR | 6 | 1 | 16.7 | 0 | 0 |
| Ireland | IE | 8 | 2 | 25 | 2 | 25 |
| Israel | IL | 40 | 10 | 25 | 4 | 10 |
| Italy | IT | 30 | 4 | 13.3 | 6 | 20 |
| Japan | JP | 117 | 14 | 12 | 16 | 13.7 |

| Country | Code | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lebanon | LB | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Macau | MO | 8 | 1 | 12.5 | 1 | 12.5 |
| Malaysia | MY | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Netherlands | NL | 27 | 8 | 29.6 | 3 | 11.1 |
| New Zealand | NZ | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Norway | NO | 6 | 3 | 50 | 1 | 16.7 |
| Pakistan | PK | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Peru | PE | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Poland | PL | 10 | 2 | 20 | 0 | 0 |
| Portugal | PL | 6 | 2 | 33.3 | 0 | 0 |
| Qatar | QA | 6 | 1 | 16.7 | 1 | 16.7 |
| Republic of Korea | KR | 73 | 15 | 20.5 | 7 | 9.6 |
| Romania | RO | 9 | 1 | 11.1 | 1 | 11.1 |
| Russian Federation | RU | 21 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 9.5 |
| Saudi Arabia | SA | 3 | 1 | 33.3 | 0 | 0 |
| Singapore | SG | 62 | 16 | 25.8 | 8 | 12.9 |
| Slovakia | SK | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| South Africa | ZA | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Spain | ES | 15 | 3 | 20 | 2 | 13.3 |
| Sri Lanka | LK | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Sweden | SE | 7 | 2 | 28.6 | 1 | 14.3 |
| Switzerland | CH | 38 | 12 | 31.6 | 2 | 5.3 |
| Taiwan | TW | 34 | 4 | 11.8 | 6 | 17.6 |
| Thailand | TH | 8 | 1 | 12.5 | 1 | 12.5 |
| Tunisia | TN | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Turkey | TR | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| United Arab | AE | 3 | 1 | 33.3 | 0 | 0 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Emirates | | | | | | |
| United Kingdom | UK | 158 | 47 | 29.7 | 24 | 15.2 |
| United States | US | 826 | 217 | 26.3 | 129 | 15.6 |
| Vietnam | VN | 4 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 25 |
| Total | | 3350 | 710 | | 457 | |

**Table 3: ACL-IJCNLP 2021's acceptance rates by country/region. Last four columns use the papers included in the main conference and Findings.**

## 4. Summary

Despite the challenges caused by the pandemic, we received 3,350 full-paper submissions; 710 were accepted to the main conference; 493 were invited to, and 457 will appear in, the Findings.

As PCs, we were in charge of many tasks as summarized in Section 2. Below are the main lessons we have learned from the experience and some recommendations for ACL executives and future conference organizers.

1) The quality of the conference largely depends on the quality of reviews, and finding a sufficient number of qualified and responsible reviewers is very hard:

    a) ACL can create and maintain a database of qualified PCs/SACs/ACs/reviewers.
    b) ACL can assign some officers to evaluate and extend the external paper assignment system (see the issues discussed in Section 2.9).
    c) One-on-one mentoring described in Section 2.10 complicates the paper assignment process and requires coordination between the mentoring committee, PCs, SACs, and ACs. Maybe ACL can explore other venues for reviewer mentoring? For instance, experienced reviewers can mentor their students/junior team members by recruiting them as secondary reviewers. In that case, ACL needs to contact Softconf to make the platform more friendly to secondary reviewers.

2) The workload of PCs is not sustainable:

    a) We started our weekly PC meetings in June 2020, switched to biweekly meetings in December 2020, and switched to up to 6 meetings per week before the acceptance notification deadline. There was simply too much work for three people.
    b) As of July 20, 2021, we have already had 86 PC meetings and 25+ meetings with other committees. Each of us has spent over 1,000 hours on the PC duties alone.

c) Given the current trend, the number of submissions is likely to increase further in the near future. The review process may also become more complex (e.g., ethics review, reproducibility, reviewer mentoring). As a result, the workload of PCs is not going to be sustainable without making some changes to PC duties and the way that PCs work.

3) There are a few ways to address the PC workload issue:

   a) The conference can have more PCs: e.g., maybe 4-6 PCs with one of them serving as the senior PC.
   b) ACL can help PCs in many ways:
      i) As mentioned above, ACL can create a database of qualified PCs/SACs/ACs/reviewers.
      ii) ACL can create a new position for "technical support":
         (1) That officer should become familiar with Softconf (or whatever submission platform ACL chooses to use) and the external COI detection and paper assignment systems.
         (2) That officer can help to resolve Softconf issues that PCs run into.
         (3) That officer can run paper assignment systems for the PCs of all the *ACL conferences; that way, PCs do not need to spend a lot of time trying to understand and debug the external systems.
      iii) ACL can create a set of tools that PCs would need: e.g., tools that calculate the overlap of two submissions.
      iv) ACL can create a standard call-for-paper (CFP) template:
         (1) The template includes text that will be identical for all the *ACL conferences (e.g., the requirements of anonymity, what figures/tables should look like, font size, etc).
         (2) Fields that need to be customized (e.g., double submission policy, page limit) should be highlighted and filled out by PCs.
         (3) That way, authors can quickly go over the standard part and focus on the highlighted fields. This will also reduce the chance that authors miss certain requirements such as the page limit on Appendices (see Section 2.6).
      v) Similarly, ACL can create a set of standard FAQs and PC/SAC/AC guides, especially the FAQs that answer common policy questions.

4) It is really important for PCs to have a channel to send out announcements quickly. We ran into a lot of problems (see Section 2.29). One thing we highly recommend is to select conference webmasters from PCs' local teams. Having a social media team also helps to spread the words.

5) The ethics review process is complicated (see Section 2.19), but is necessary given the potential impact of NLP research on the real world. The ethics review process can be fine-tuned to make it more efficient.

6) COI adds a lot of complication to the review process:
   a) Each SAC's submission list in Softconf is different due to COI, which makes the coordination among co-SACs complicated.
      i) For numerous times, some submissions fall through the crack: for instance, if a SAC has a COI with a submission and the SAC uploads to Softconf a paper assignment spreadsheet that contains a row for the submission, the row will be ignored by Softconf without giving any warning. To ensure the row is entered into Softconf, the same spreadsheet has to be uploaded by another SAC who does not have the COI with the paper.
      ii) To address this issue, PCs have to check SACs' work to ensure no submissions are left behind.
   b) To reduce the confusion caused by COI, we recommend future PCs to
      i) remind SACs that their submission lists are likely to be different, and they need to work with their co-SACs for certain tasks such as uploading paper assignment spreadsheets and making SAC recommendations.
      ii) freeze the COI calculation right after the paper assignment process and COI detection start. Otherwise, the list of submissions that are visible to SACs/ACs/reviewers will keep changing.

A final word to future PCs: being an ACL PC takes a tremendous amount of time and no matter how hard you work, you will get angry emails from some authors and others. Do not be disheartened by that. Take a deep breath and focus on the tasks you need to complete. After the conference, you can finally get a good sleep. After you wake up, you can tell yourself: "Wow, that was tough, but we did it."

Many thanks to everyone who has helped us in the past year. Enjoy the conference!

**Appendix A: Summary of PCs' Timelines**

All the tasks below are done by PCs, unless specified otherwise:

- Before the submission deadline (June 22, 2020 - Feb 1, 2021):

  - June 22, 2020: Start weekly PC meetings. Later the PCs meet 2-3 times per week (and meet almost daily before the May 5 acceptance notification date).

  - June 22 - Aug 15, 2020: Define tracks, work out a timeline, draft CFP, contact PCs from previous conferences, and discuss possible special themes for the main conference.

  - August 16 - October 21, 2020: Invite SACs.

  - Sept 15, 2020: Set up the Softconf site for the conference.
  - Oct 09 - Dec 02, 2020: SACs invite ACs.
  - Oct 5, 2020: Send out the preliminary CFP.
  - Oct 29 - Dec 4, 2020: Invite over 9,000 reviewers.
  - Nov 4, 2020: Finalize the special theme for the main conference.
  - Nov 5, 2020: Send out the first CFP with the theme information.
  - Nov 5 - Dec 8, 2020: Form the Reviewer Mentoring Committee and work out a plan for reviewer mentoring.
  - Dec 4 - Dec 12, 2020: Reviewers fill out reviewer forms.
  - Dec 13, 2020 - Jan 09, 2021: Assign reviewers to tracks; SACs select reviewers in three steps.
  - Dec 15, 2020 - Jan 25, 2021: Create submission forms and draft author FAQ.
  - Dec 15, 2020 - Feb 01, 2021: Test and enhance the external paper assignment systems.
  - Dec 20 - Dec 31, 2020: Finalize the Word/latex style file etc for the submission.
  - Jan 5, 2021: Send out the second CFP with the Softconf link, style file, reproducibility checklist.
  - Jan 11 - Jan 17, 2021: SACs add reviewers to Softconf.
  - Jan 12, 2021: Open the Softconf submission site.
  - Jan 15, 2021: Work with EAC chairs to finalize the plan for handling ethical reviews.
  - Jan 19, 2021: Finalize the review form and post it to the conference website.
  - Jan 19, 2021: Send out the final CFP.
  - Jan 25, 2021: Abstract submission deadline
  - Jan 25 - Jan 31, 2021: SACs recruit more reviewers for some tracks, based on the abstract submission number.
  - Feb 01, 2021: Full Paper submission deadline (for both long and short papers)

- Review cycle (Feb 2 - May 5, 2021):
  - Feb 02 - Feb 05, 2021: Assign papers to tracks and run paper-to-AC assignment.

- ○ Feb 06 - Feb 12, 2021: SACs/ACs check papers in tracks for desk reject and track adjustment.
- ○ Feb 13 - Feb 16, 2021: Manually move papers, decide on desk-reject papers, and run paper-to-reviewer assignments.
- ○ Feb 17 - Feb 23, 2021: SACs/ACs finalize reviewer-paper assignment and track adjustment.
- ○ Feb 25 - Mar 20, 2021: Send reminders to reviewers during the review period.
- ○ Mar 21 - Mar 24, 2021: SACs/ACs chase late reviews and handle missing reviewers with the help of emergency reviewers.
- ○ March 24: Copy flagged papers to the EACL track.
- ○ Mar 25 - Mar 31, 2021: the Author Response period
- ○ Mar 25 - April 15, 2021: EAC chairs check and assign flagged papers to EAC reviewers and the EAC reviews are due on April 15.
- ○ Apr 01 - Apr 07, 2021: ACs lead discussion during the Reviewer Discussion period (ACs lead discussion).
- ○ Apr 08 - Apr 14, 2021: ACs finalize meta-reviews and make recommendations to SACs
- ○ Apr 15 - Apr 24, 2021: SACs rank papers based on meta-reviews and make recommendations to PCs.
- ○ Apr 15 - Apr 24, 2021: EAC chairs discuss flagged papers and make recommendations to PCs.
- ○ Apr 25 - May 04, 2021: Make decisions based on AC/SAC/EAC recommendations, reviews, etc.; SACs and ACs recommend best reviewers and best papers.
- ○ May 05, 2021: Send out Accept / Reject Notifications

- ● After the acceptance notification (May 6 -- Aug 6, 2021):
  - ○ May 1 - July 31, 2021: Work with Underline, VIC, etc. to set up the virtual conference site.
  - ○ May 6 - 14, 2021: Draft instructions for camera-ready submission.
  - ○ May 6 - July 6, 2021: Choose and invite keynote speakers.
  - ○ May 8 - May 22, 2021: Form the Best Paper Selection Committee (BPSC) and finalize the best paper candidate list.
  - ○ May 28 - July 10, 2021: Work on the main conference schedule.
  - ○ Jun 01, 2021: Camera-ready submission deadline
  - ○ Jun 07, 2021: Make final decisions on conditionally accepted papers and notify authors
  - ○ Jun 08, 2021: Work with Underline finalize the pre-recording submission form, and send the instructions to authors.
  - ○ Jun 12, 2021: Inform authors about oral vs. poster presentations.
  - ○ Jun 24, 2021: BPSC selects the best and outstanding papers
  - ○ Jun 24 - June 26, 2021: Deadline for authors to upload pre-recordings for virtual conferences.

- ○ Jun 20 - July 7, 2021: Draft various documents to be included in the main conference proceedings.
- ○ July 5, 2021: Announce the Best and outstanding papers
- ○ July 8, 2021: Announce keynote speeches
- ○ July 12, 2021: Announce Outstanding reviewers.
- ○ July 17, 2021: Announce Main conference schedule
- ○ July 17, 2021: The Publication Team sends the main conference proceedings to ACL anthology.
- ○ July 15 - July 24, 2021: Write this PC report
- ○ July 23, 2021: Underline opens the virtual conference site to all the registered conference attendees.
- ○ July 18 - July 25, 2021: Send training sessions' information to authors, session chairs, main stage speakers, and other ACL committees.
- ○ July 26 - July 28, 2021: Underline's training sessions for presenters, session chairs, and student volunteers.
- ○ Aug 1 - Aug 6, 2021: The ACL-IJCNLP 2021 conference
- ○ Mid- to late Aug 2021: The wrap-up meeting with ACL executives and ACL 2021 committee.